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Tom Spanbauer

Writing Your Face

The following essay is taken from the text of a keynote speech delivered by Mr. Spanbauer at the Theoretical Approaches to Marginalized Literatures Conference. The editors wish to thank UM's Professor Veronica Stewart, whose valuable work with the conference made the publication of this essay possible.

When I was asked to give the keynote speech on marginalized literature, what I thought the guy said was *marginal life* literature.

And what I thought was, how did this guy find out about my life?

Then, when I understood it was *marginalized literature*, and after I said yes, the first thing I had to find out was what marginalized literature was.

The second thing I had to find out, after I found out what marginalized literature was, was why in the hell did they ask me to talk about it?

Just what is a margin?

My top shelf old red dictionary defines margin as the part of the page or the sheet outside the main body of the text.

Defines marginal as that which is written in the margins of a page or sheet, or as occupying the borderland of a relatively stable territorial or cultural area, or as characterized by the incorporation of habits and values of one culture to another and by the

incomplete assimilation of one culture to another.

Located at the fringe of consciousness.

Margin—outside the main body of the text.

Marginal—that which is in the margins.

And then there's Marginalized. The -ized part means to cause to be—or conform to—or resemble.

So what I came to was that marginalized means conforming to what is outside the main body of the text.

I have spent my life trying to be in the main body of the text.

The most important thing in my family was our good name. At nine o'clock Mass on Sunday morning, when we as a family received Communion, the most important thing was our good name, and that as we walked back to our pews, with the Host, with God in our mouths, we could hold our heads high and walk proud.

Our worth was in the eyes of other people.

Us and them.

This one morning, though, there was trouble. My aunt had called my sister a whore, and my mother had found out my aunt had called my sister a whore. My aunt and her family always went to nine o'clock Mass like us. So there was this one morning, the morning my mother knew my aunt had called my sister a whore and that Sunday morning was also the morning that my aunt and my mother were setting up coffee hour in the basement of the church, together. After Communion, after we walked back, heads held high, proud of our good name, and were kneeling in the pew with God—then my mother got up, genuflected, made

the sign of the cross, walked down the aisle and down the steps to the basement. I looked over at my fourteen year-old sister, the whore, and my sister looked back at me.

It wasn't long before all hell broke loose. From below us, the congregation, from below, the Monsignor up on the altar saying Go In Peace God Be With You, from below us, pots and pans were crashing in the basement, screams of bloody murder floating up. How dare you call my daughter a whore! You screwed every man in Blackfoot before you finally found a husband.

I ran down the stairs and on the floor were two bodies, all nylons and high heels and Sunday hats askew, my mother and my aunt screaming and spitting at each other rolling all over the floor.

Marginal Life Literature.

Located at the fringe of consciousness.

The Holy Cross nuns at the St. Joseph's School taught me manners, respect for authority, citizenship, fear of the devil and good spelling. I always got an A in deportment and application. The Baltimore Catechism was my rule book. If I didn't know what to do, I could just go to the rule book—which I memorized—which I incorporated the habits and values of—which I assimilated—so I'd go to the rule book and memorize the rule and repeat the rule, so I would know how to be, how to act, what was right and what was wrong. What I had to do to get into the main body of the text, that is, heaven. What I had to do to stay out of the margins, that is, limbo, purgatory and hell, and since I was baptized in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost I didn't have to worry about the margins of limbo because the rule is, the boundary of limbo is you

don't go there if you're baptized, and I was baptized, but that still left purgatory, and that still left hell.

So it was very important for me to know what I had to do. What I had to know. How I had to act. How I had not to act. To make God receive me into His chosen fold, into the main body of his text, that is, to make God love me. So I wouldn't fall into the margins and go to hell.

What I had to do to make God love me and not go to hell was follow the rules, and the rules were in the Baltimore Catechism. The rules were in the book. The rules were in the main body of the text.

In fact, the rules *were* the main body of the text.

Everything else was marginal, was suspect, was located at the fringe of consciousness, was the weeping and the gnashing of teeth.

I have spent my life finding out what the rules are, so I can follow the rules, so I will be loved.

Picture this: I am standing on Tyhee Road in the morning waiting for the school bus. I have my red binder and my lunch pail with the Lone Ranger and Tonto on it. I am wearing the matching blue denim outfit, coat and pants. My white shirt button collar, polished black wedgies. My hair is parted on the left side like the picture of the boy in the barber shop that says Boy's Regular under it.

Boy's Regular.

I am standing up straight, good posture, probably repeating prayers to myself for the poor souls in purgatory.

Up pulls the Tyhee school bus.

Inside the Tyhee shool bus are *them*. People not like me. Mormons mostly, and Indians. What my father called Ne'er Do Wells. My father in his Buick driving to church through the land of Ford-driving ne'er

do wells. And these ne'er do wells, these dirt farm Mormon kids, these Indian kids, look out the window at me, the fag in his tidy blue outfit and parted hair and they rub their hands together.

Getting on that shool bus is the story of my life: there I am, located on the fringe of consciousness, walking into the main body of the text.

Spent my life. Student government, King of the Senior Ball, Most Outstanding Personality, Alpha Chi Omega Dream Man, selfless, diligent Peace Corps volunteer, loyal husband, Bachelor of Arts, Master of Fine Arts, caring teacher, successful novelist—when you go to the Portland airport there's a sign right next to the picture of that famous American Rush Limbaugh that says Tom Spanbauer lives here, and that proves it goddamnit—next to Rush Limbaugh proves that I'm in the main body of the text, and here I am today in front of you and I really really hope you guys like this speech and you don't think this keynote speech is too marginal, and you think I'm really smart. And I hope you guys like my outfit and my hair and I hope you guys really like me.

United States of America. In the world, the United States of America is the main body of the text.

America the Great Melting Pot.

America the Great Incorporator of Habits and Values of all its many cultures and peoples. America the Great Cultural Assimilator. The Great Gatherer from the margins of the world into the main body of the text. Bring me your tired, your cold, your hungry.

But not your Haitians.

And don't ask America what happened, what is happening to her Native Americans.

So I have a question. At this convention, if we're talking about who's in the margins, who's not in the main body of the text, then who is it we're *not* talking about here today?

The New York Times Book Review!

The New York Times Best Sellers List

Baltimore Catechism Rule Book.

And all those New Yorkers who call literature from this part of America, *Southern* literature, who call literature from this part of America, *Western* literature, when nobody who is a New Yorker calls literature from New York, *Eastern* literature.

Ask a Native American about marginalization. Marginalization is nothing new to the Native American. The Native Americans, treated by the U.S. Government as a conquered people, were the first of us to be marginalized, first along with the African slaves the Europeans brought over on the slave ships.

The very blood in their veins is considered marginal, the color of their skin, their type of hair, their bodies not the main body of the text—they are them, not us. These Native Americans have had a boundary, a margin drawn around them, actual lines that define their reservations, not keeping us out, but keeping them in.

And the African-American has boundaries too. Just take a look at Portland, Oregon. Portland, Oregon is a segregated city. Physically segregated. The white people live here and here and here and here and the black people live over there in the north. You drive

from one neighborhood to another and you physically experience the color line, the boundary, the margin.

One of the saddest and subtlest points about racism—yes, when we start talking about marginalization we're talking racism and sexism, us and them, the have and the have not, the main body of the text and the margins of the text—one of the saddest things about this thin-lipped white man greed of the eighties, is how it took the money and ran, and left the marginal with nothing where there used to be hardly anything.

Which leaves the marginal with no programs, no boot straps to even pull up, no education and no hope. What that does to the marginal is bake sales for AIDS and billions of dollars for Star Wars. What that does for the marginal—and this is the saddest part—is turn us against ourselves.

How many sad stories do I know of social programs, educational programs gone sour because there is so little money, so little recourse, a pittance of funds for hundreds of programs to fight over. So we are divided. We are conquered. We shall not overcome. We shall backbite, rip off, fuck over, do anything that is necessary to get the funding for our tiny lunch program, for our tiny alcohol treatment program.

One thing that is new, that is different about our long American history of marginalization, is this is the first time in U.S. history when middle class educated white males can be considered marginal.

The gay man.

Outside the main body of the text.

In the borderland.

Located at the fringe of consciousness.

One of them.

The incorporation of habits but incomplete assimilation.

Me.

In the sixties I marched against the war, but I didn't experience war.

In the sixties I marched with black people, marched against oppression, but I was not black.

In the seventies, I marched with Native Americans against oppression, but I was not Native American.

In the seventies I marched with women, marched against sexual oppression, but I was not a woman.

In the eighties, I marched with gay people, marched against oppression. In the eighties, AIDS has, one by one, taken my friends from me, has made my very body the main body of the text.

I have spent my life trying to be in the main body of the text, and now, in the nineties, I'd much rather be watching this on television.

Literature. My old red top shelf dictionary defines literature as writings having excellence of form or expression and expressing ideas of permanent or universal interest.

My question now is if writing must express a universal interest in order to be called literature, then how can literature be literature if it's marginalized literature?

Does gay literature have an excellence of form or expression that expresses ideas of permanent interest only to gay people?

Does women's literature have an excellence of form or expression that expresses ideas of permanent interest only to women?

Does Native American literature have an excellence of form or expression that expresses ideas of permanent interest only to Native Americans?

Where do we stop with this nineteenth-century naming and filing and classifying?

Back there at the beginning of this keynote speech—back there when you guys all still liked me—I defined marginalized as conforming to what is outside the main body of the text.

Now I'm wondering does it ever happen that we marginalizeders could perhaps conform and resemble to such a degree that—and this happens all the time to me when I'm writing—that what is in the margins gets to be so much that the margins overwhelm the main body of the text and what happens then is the margins become the main body of the text and then the main body of the text is no longer the main body of the text and all of a sudden is that which occupies the borderland.

We'll never reach this place unless we marginalizeders all stick together.

Black, Asian, women, gay, Native American, white. And here's the secret to sticking together.

Oh! The Humanity!

The universal.

The human heart.

What's the *same* about us all.

What's beating my heart is beating yours.

Jorge Luis Borges once said that all that writers do is describe their own faces.

When you go to the mirror and look into your

eyes, when you go down into your darkest place and find the dark truth there, and when you bring your dark truth up to the light, and when you speak your dark truth openly and clearly, you do not marginalize people, you do not exclude them, you include them, because what is in my dark heart is also in yours.

According to Emerson, a famous marginalized American, genius is knowing that what is in your own heart is true for all men.

In my heart, there is failure, fault, fear. I write of moments in my life when the bottom fell out. I write about what's wrong with the world, my world. What's wrong with me. The process of my fiction is exploring my darkness. I go into my dark room, go into that dark theater, naked I turn on the computer screen, touch darkness, touch myself. I am committed to finding the truth, but I don't know before I go into the dark, what the truth is. And there's no promise I will find a light at the end of the tunnel; in fact, the light at the end of the tunnel could be a speeding locomotive headed my way.

What if I find something too dark, too scary?
Monstrous?

I'm sure I will.

Ere I go into the valley.

I will find death.

Death is the source of my story, of your story.

Death is not in the margins. Death is the main body of the text.

In the face of death, we learn what it is that makes us human.

When I go down into my dark theater, I find everyone there. All of you down in there with me. All of you—women and gays and Native Americans and

African-Americans and white male Republicans, Popes and priests and senators from North Carolina and Utah, even Lon Mabon is down in the darkness with me. All of us, oh the humanity, together, no them, just us, all of us, doing the nasty in the dark, entangled, trying to find how our beginnings lead to our middles and how that will lead to our end.

My story is entangled with yours. My fate entangled with yours.

By exploring my darkness I find my humanity.

In that sense, my darkness, my otherness, my marginality is in fact my gift.

How will we see genius, how can we see our humanity, if we have never examined what it is in our hearts? Not our gay heart. Not our woman's heart, not our Native American heart, not our white male Republican heart.

Tell me what's gay, what's straight, what's woman, what's Asian, and I am no longer in a family of human beings.

Isn't marginalization, in a sense, a censorship?

Put me in a box and tape GAY over my box.

Put you in that box over there and tape ASIAN over the box.

Put you over there and tape AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMAN over the box.

What do we have here?

We have the rule book.

Us and them.

We are divided and conquered.

Back at the St. Joseph's school, my religion taught me that what is in my heart is sinful. My science class taught me that what is in my heart is scientifically

unverifiable. The business class taught me that if it comes from my heart, its only worth is what I can sell it for. My art class taught me that if it comes from my heart, then it probably has already been said, so just try to put a new angle on it.

Everything I've ever learned from this Christian Walt Disney Scientific American culture of mine has told me not to listen to my heart. Everything, that is, *except* what I've learned from the marginalized.

Writers write because they weren't invited to the party.

So, let's go back to Tyhee Road and me standing in my blue denim wedgies, my red binder, waiting for the bus.

The Tyhee schoolbus pulls up.

Let's tell the story this way. Let's start with me looking in the window of the bus and instead of Indians and Ford-driving dirt-farming Mormons, let's say something miraculous happens and who I see are scared kids, funny kids, sad kids, kids like me. And then, due to the miraculous, those kids look out and see this funny-looking guy, a scared kid, a funny kid, a sad kid, a kid like them.

Let's say then I get on the bus and we drive to the University of Montana to the Marginalized Literatures convention, and we're all together on the bus, girls and boys and blacks and whites, and Asians and Mormons and Catholics and Jews and Native Americans and gays and Democrats and even one Republican, and we are singing a song. We are not singing We Shall Overcome.

We are singing We Shall Kick Your Ass.

Now what I sound like is an old hippy white guy preaching peace and love.

Listen to me.

Margins are very important. Boundaries are important. Without boundaries, I don't know where I start or stop.

Good fences make good neighbors.

So instead of making our boundaries into things that divide us, that categorize us, let's let our fences make us good neighbors. I can sit my morning coffee on our fence in between us and you can set your chamomile tea or your whiskey or your cigarette or your cowboy hat or your joint or your condoms or your Bible or your nipple ring on the fence too, and we can talk about the fence, the fence itself, or how it's different on this side from that side.

We can talk about words, how each word has a corral around it of meaning and how a word in its corral changes when you put another word in its corral next to it.

We can talk about the spaces in between words, how those blank silences, those little respites, put a margin around a word.

We could talk about how without spaces in between and margins all the way around, how language would dissolve into a plenum, a black hole full of everything.

We have all spent our lives trying to find out what the rule is, so we can follow the rule, or break the rule, so we can be loved.

We have all spent our lives, or part of our lives, in the margin, with our worth only judged in other

people's eyes.

It is not only my pain.

It is not only your pain.

It is the pain of being different, off, peculiar,
odd, marginal, the black hole full of nothing, the pain of
the mass of men and their quiet desperation.

The pain of the darkness where you don't know
the rules.

The pain of the darkness it takes for us to see
the light.

Ladies and gentlemen, women and men, black,
yellow, brown, red, white, gay, straight.

This funny-looking face is mine. This funny-
looking face is yours. Is his. Is hers. This funny-
looking face is our face.

Parade your peculiar.

It's what makes us human.